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HISTORY: A CENTURY LATE, THE TRUTH ARRIVES

THE FRENCH ARMY CONCEDES THAT ALFRED DREYFUS WAS INNOCENT

by FREDERICK PAINTON

In sometimes surprising ways, the long reach of France's history still intrudes on the nation's conscience. How else to explain the scene on Sept. 7 when 1,700 people, invited by France's Central Consistory of Jews, turned out to hear General Jean-Louis Mourrut, head of the army's historical service. The subject was Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who 101 years ago was sentenced by a military court to life imprisonment on notorious Devil's Island on trumped-up charges that he was a spy for the Germans. Mourrut's mission on this occasion was to acknowledge more than a century later, and for the first time publicly, that the French army had been wrong.

Perhaps only in France would such a belated admission by such a deeply conservative institution as the army still ring with meaning. For Jean Kahn, president of the Central Consistory of Jews, Mourrut's words were considered a significant event: "The general said things before us that never had been said by a military man," said Kahn. "That is, indisputably, progress." Less impressed, the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* sarcastically wrote, "The army got it! Incredible! Dreyfus was innocent!"

It was not quite an apology, but much more than a historical note. The Dreyfus case unleashed a political storm at the time. It sundered the French between such "Dreyfusards" as the crusading writer Emile Zola who saw the young Captain as the innocent victim of an anti-Semitic officer corps and traditionalists who regarded any attack on the army as unpatriotic. In fact, for some anti-Semitic groups, Dreyfus symbolized the supposed disloyalty of French Jews.

Nearly 12 years passed before Dreyfus' conviction was reversed. Despite what he had endured, the stoic captain never lost faith and returned to the army: he was promoted to the rank of major and given the Legion of Honor.

Still, like other great divisions among the French, the Dreyfus case lives on because it remains viscerally political. Among the anti-Dreyfusards were conservatives still opposed to the outcome of the French Revolution. Dreyfusards saw in the case a major issue, individual rights, trampled in the name of national security. Until Mourrut spoke, the army had appeared to assume Dreyfus was not innocent.

Mourrut's appearance, in fact, was prompted by an article in the army historical journal last year that questioned Dreyfus' innocence, suggesting it was merely "the thesis generally accepted by historians." Such was the outcry in the French Jewish community that Mourrut's predecessor in charge of the history division was fired. Under Defense Minister Charles Millon, Mourrut quietly made amends, telling his audience that far from feeling nostalgia for the past, "the army is fighting for the values of our times—the values of truth, liberty and justice." The French never lack for new quarrels, but they never quite forget the old ones.